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ABSTRACT

It is held that academic learning, beginning with speech mastery, is the natural, necessary, and most legitimate core of every child's nursery curriculum. And no subject matter is more academic in nature than the mastery of spoken and written language. However, as intellectually challenging as the learning of first language may be, it is generally mastered before the end of the nursery years. But why is print fluency assumed by almost all parents and educators to be of legitimate concern only when children become older? Print and speech can be learned when the child is immersed in a conversational environment that models and invites the use of both. There is no convincing evidence that one mode is significantly more difficult to learn than the other. Justification for encouraging print fluency in the nursery can be found in children's typical uses of print. Such uses are related to children's self-concept knowledge; their ability to manage fantasies and associated emotions, imagined fears, and insecurities; and their ability to acquire and retain factual information. The academic nursery curriculum is a child-directed curriculum oriented toward the child's own thoughts and concepts, hopes, desires, interests, visions, and fantasies. Sensitive parents and teachers can elicit children's ideas and encourage their representation in print. The family and school can provide books that extend the child's experience. (RH)

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LEGITIMATE ACADEMIC SUBJECT MATTER IN THE NURSERY CURRICULUM

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LEGITIMATE ACADEMIC SUBJECT MATTER IN THE NURSERY CURRICULUM

LANGUAGES...THE NATURAL CURRICULUM OF THE NURSERY.

There is no subject matter more academic in nature than the mastery of spoken and written language.

Spoken language mastery. The learning of spoken language begins just after birth. Toddlers have already acquired a knowledge base of applied phonetics, semantics and syntactics. they are mastering the entire corpus of a spoken language, with all its cultural, contextual and affective nuances. First language learning demanding accelerated learning of such complexity and significance that the toddler's intellectual rate of learning will never again be exceeded, no matter what the child's eventual education attainments. However, intellectually challenging the learning of first language, it is fluently mastered, almost universally before the end of the nursery years. Thus academic learning, beginning with speech mastery, is the natural, necessary, and most legitimate core of every child's nursery curriculum.

Print language mastery. Parents and other nursery teachers take for granted that all children will readily master the speech representation of language. In sharp contrast, few if any, expect little ones to master the print dialect of language...reading and writing. The specialized academic language domains of the arts and sciences, usually expressed in the form of print, are presumed by most to be far beyond the abilities or interests

of nursery age children. Most assume that if any nursery children learn to read and write and demonstrate any mastery of the special dialects of the arts and sciences, that they have been subjected to "cruel and unusual" duress or that the reported achievements have been fabricated (Hedges, 1977).

Fluency in the traditional academic dialects demands mastery of the many special, extensive vocabularies of the intellectual domains as well as the basic mechanics of reading and writing. Those who acknowledge that little tots are capable of initiating such learning generally feel that little tots have no immediate need to acquire these skills (e.g. White, 1978). Our education community generally considers that academic skills and knowledge are definitely not critical to fulfillment and success of tiny children and are imposed on school age children, not to satisfy their immediate needs, but primarily to serve distant vocational and governmental purposes.

ARGUMENTS AGAINST NURSERY ACADEMICS. Print fluency is assumed by almost all parents and educators to become a legitimate concern only when children become older, when they are ready for the "hard, unpleasant intellectual work" presumed to be essential for the mastery of the academic reading and writing.

If a child in the nursery acquires academic knowledge in the print domain, parents and teachers often become defensive, insisting that, "It was not my fault."... "I didn't teach her

to read,"..."He is a genius and learned it in spite of my efforts to discourage him." or "I tried to get her to play like the others, but she insisted on reading."

Compare these negative reactions to the PRINT-fluent nursery child with the happy parental reactions to the SPEECH-fluent nursery child..."My child is so bright." "She learns so easily." "He talks about everything."

Why this disparity between their positive reaction to the early learning of speech and their negative reaction to the early acquisition of print fluency? Do parents and nursery teachers fear that their own frustrated and pressured early school experiences will be cruelly extended into the happy and carefree nursery years? Are they merely reacting to the prevailing advice of popular writers and neighborhood skeptics. If so, it is entirely understandable that they would take the safe tactic of delaying and avoiding the introduction of the print coded academic languages.

However, if learning speech is the inevitable hallmark of the nursery and its ubiquitous mastery is essential to a rich and fulfilling early childhood, why should we not assume that if a second language, academic print usage, were learned in the same way and at the same time it would add even more to the richness and fulfillment of the child's nursery years?

The well conceived academic nursery is capable of achieving two vital and significant goals for little ones. First, it

can greatly expand the child's opportunities for capturing, holding, expanding on and savoring childhood's most precious thoughts and actions. Secondly, it can halt the pressures of hurried adults who attempt to also hurry children past the delights of fulfilling childhood. These goals of the effective academic nursery become increasingly vital as social and technological changes attempt to wrench childhood's riches from children (Elkind, 1981).

FEASABILITY OF NURSERY ACADEMICS. Although educators and psycholinguists have recognized many differences between print and speech, there is no convincing evidence that either is significantly more difficult to learn than the other. Both can be learned to fluent levels when the child is immersed in a conversational environment that models and invites the use of either print or speech.

If the premise is accepted that toddlers capable of learning speech are capable of mastering print dialects (e.g., reading, writing), then we must answer the question: "Tots learn to speak for their daily survival, but why should they learn to use print? They seem to survive quite happily without it until they enter schcol."

Relevance of early print fluency mastery for future academic, vocational and personal success can be documented. Under conditions of continuing academic nourishment in the home, early academic fluency can catalyse intellectual growth, resulting in later

advantages academically, socially, and personally. However, if the only justification of academic fluency in the nursery is that it will have future relevance it would be extremely hard to justify the cost of beginning literacy instruction a few years earlier. However, it does have significant immediate as well as future relevance, in ways which are directly analogous to the nursery child's acquisition of speech fluency.

Childhood Reasons for Academic Fluency. We discover the immediate and fulfilling value of speech by noting the immediate focus of children's own speech. Similarly we can discover the immediate focus and fulfilling value of print for toddlers by noting what they want to author and share. What do they choose to "talk about" through the print medium?

NURSERY ACADEMIC CURRICULUM.

Self-Concept Knowledge. In our experience, toddlers as young as two, beginning to use print want to tell about who and what they love. They first simply exclaim the names of all they hold most dear, "Mommy!"..."Daddy!" Very quickly they dictate messages that tell why they chose those words to share. "I love Mommy," is a favorite message by these young authors, which, translated into print, becomes a vehicle for solidifying and sharing of self.

You may ask, "How significant is this print-mediated approach to shared knowledge? Couldn't sharing be done just as easily through speech?"

These personalized messages which can be so vital to self-concept development, need to be repeatedly shared with all who care so that the children receive overt reinforcement for their own creations, the expression of their innermost thoughts and emotions. Therefore, we can say that the fleeting speech medium needs the enduring reminder, the permanence of print, if such emotionally "magic" messages are to be shared simultaneously and often by both child and parent.

Knowledge From Fantasy. Children the age of three explore words that have the captivating, but often fearsome qualities of fantasy..."Monster", "dinosaur", "Dracula", and in addition more loved figures..."princess", "Superman" and "Cinderella." These words become part of children, the magnification of pensive moments when they are alone in thought.

The world takes on manageable proportions when the child is allowed to express, through print, these words and ideas - and to share them with significant others - whose more objective reactions to these fearsome or awe-inspiring concepts then take precedence over imagined fears or insecurities. Children are encouraged to communicate and record, openly and non-defensively about the ideas they contemplate. If you ask "Is not speech enough? Can't little Chad jump, fly and shout "Superman," and never bother with print? We answer, "Perhaps, but if Chad is to share powerful feelings with his own "superpeople", (Mom, Dad and teacher), so that these feelings get "sorted out" in

productive and lasting ways, then print can play a powerful mediating role."

In his book, The Uses of Enchantment, Bettelheim (1975) reminds us that the "fearful genii" of the psyche fight for, and not against, fulfillment when stimulated, recognized and dealt with through tangible means. The folk wisdom of tales and rhymes interacts with vivid inner fantasies so that every shadow, once a fearsome creature, is rationalized, made concrete, and manageable. Print loosens the "mental fingers" clasped so tightly over tiny eyes - and helps the child view the world more realistically.

Fantasy is channeled when the little one reads and hears his own stories dozens of times. When parents or teachers "don't have time right now", the child can turn to books and find solace and cognitive stimulation in a world beyond his own world.

Knowledge from Fact. Concurrently, the real world of facts is equally fascinating. To the child, sand, mud, spiders, trees, motors, and spaceships are objects of intense curiousity. To those who ask "Why add print?", we simply respond, "Print allows the little 'scientist' to collect, analyze, and save the conceptual 'prizes.'" It also greatly expands the arena of search. Books "open doors" to oceans, jungles, invisable worlds that lie beyond the scope of the normal immediate neighborhood.

Is there an objection a four-year-old being able to read and write about a turtle, a jet or a violin?

Integration of Academic Nursery Curricula. Imagine a child that has been able to use print as fluently as speech since age three or four. Imagine that paper, pens, pencils, a typewriter or word processor, and a new stack of library books have been at hand every week. Imagine that this same child has written dozens of his own little story books, that notes and letters have been authored, and that the child is now five.

The domains of knowledge experienced by this child have been enriched and fulfilled in the most significant academic domains including identity and controlling the:

1. Self: ...Who am I?...Who I am not?... How I compare with others?
2. Fantasy world: ...What is real?...What are my fears?... What are my dreams?...How do I control such thoughts?
3. Real world: ...How can I see?...How can I know?... How can I know what I cannot see?...How does it work? ...Why?...When?...Where?...

HURRIED, STIFFLED OR ENCHANTED. An academic curriculum for the nursery (whether in the home or school) is not "hurried" in the sense of being the imposed, pressured, unnatural or exploitive drill that is warned against by all protectors of childhood.

Rather, it is for the toddler, a "magic" curriculum which offers the child the print language. And because it is empathically oriented toward the child's own thoughts and concepts,

the little child is not even a little overwhelmed by this knowledge, but reacts with an insatiable thirst for more.

Who defines this "magical" knowledge, the child's personal curriculum, the enchanting content of the mind during these nursery years? In a most significant way, it is the child: the child's own "magic" thoughts, hopes, desires, interests, visions, and fantasies as they are set to print. The special parent or teacher who understands mental midwifery as did Socrates of old, knows how to bring ideas out of the child and to aid in the process of creating, in print, these thoughts thus brought to light. Concurrently, the family or school helps the child find books which extend the "circle of magic," beyond the child's momentary scope of experience.

There will still be those with lingering doubts about such an academic nursery. They will ask again, "Isn't there a danger that the child will be hurried past the delights of childhood play by imposing academic learning time?"

We answer, "Compare the time spent by toddlers learning print fluency with television viewing time!" Perhaps a half an hour a day of that rich parent-child interaction is stolen from the time otherwise spent on alternative activities, such as home viewing of "The Dukes of Hazard." The child's remaining hours are further enriched as social playtime and worktime possibilities are multiplied by images of fact and fancy, as time spent alone becomes productive, not empty.

Our little ones will be "ready" to read and write whenever we begin to "speak" the language of print with them.

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